

Sunday 22 February 2026
The First Sunday of Lent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7

NT: Romans 5:12-19

Gp: Matthew 4:1-11

The season of Lent is an invitation to contemplation. It is an opportunity to strip away some of the clutter of our lives in which, all too often, we suffer from an excess of everything. There can be so much crowding into our consciousness, vying for our attention, competing for our time. Depending on one's stage of life the elements that cause the clutter will vary. It can be the demands of work which can end up spilling over into many parts of life and sometimes knows no limitations. If one has a young family, the needs of the children often dictate almost anything and everything that we do. Time to oneself for stillness and quiet can be difficult to find. Even for retired people, it's all too easy to live a rushed life where days are packed full of activity. Time to read, pray and contemplate can be hard to find. Whatever stage of life, the relentless news cycle of distressing events pursues us, our phones bombard us with notifications of issues important and often trivial, social media draws us into controversies and celebrity lives and we are tempted to overshare our lives with friends and strangers alike. Or is it just me?

It is possible to receive the season of Lent as a gift and not simply as another guilt-inducing demand upon our time. The gift of Lent could be to take the opportunity to find a different pattern of day-to-day life. Lent is a 46-day period of time which invites us to identify with Jesus's isolated sojourn in the desert after his baptism before he launched into his public ministry. The gospels tell us it was a period of contemplation for Jesus, and we focus most particularly on the ways in which he was tempted by Satan. It's an incredibly powerful story which can be both frightening and enthralling for us and which opens a door for us to step back from the busyness of life to refocus on the heart of faith: what does Christ call us to be and how can we live faithfully?

Jesus's forty days of isolation took place in the desert of the Jordan valley and there is something of Lent which is an invitation into a desert of our own imagining. I consider myself very fortunate to live close to the Jerusalem wilderness (el Bariyah). In just 20 minutes from my home in occupied East Jerusalem, I can be in the midst of that desert, unable to see a single living soul or dwelling. I have come to love this place, and I have often travelled there, even solo, to enter into that extraordinary wilderness. At St George's College, which is the Anglican Centre for pilgrimage in the Holy Land, we always take our pilgrims into this desert too. In a land of many breathtaking sights, this is one of the most impressive. And we don't take people there just so that they get a glimpse and to say they've seen the desert. We always read the passage of Jesus's temptations in the desert and then give people the chance to find some time alone for their own prayers and thoughts. We want them to have an experience of the desert, to dwell in it, even if only briefly. It leaves a very powerful impression on most people.

Tragically, time in the desert near to Jerusalem isn't as easy to find as it used to be. Since the war began, Israel's military forces have restricted access to these areas. There are illegal settlements throughout that part of the Occupied West Bank, and in order to protect those

settlements, Israel has made the movement of visitors, be they pilgrims, walkers and also more significantly, the movement of Palestinians who live there, far more difficult. Even in the desert, a place of such awesome beauty and a location of the apparent absence of the infrastructure of humanity, the offence of oppression and apartheid practices cannot be escaped.

Despite all of that and perhaps also, in the light of all that, taking time to contemplate and to repent of the things which are harmful to ourselves, to others and to our relationship with God is particularly important. If we do not create space to reflect and to process our lives and our relationships, we may find that we are driven by our own selfish preoccupations rather than by the divine call to walk in the way of Jesus Christ.

Thomas Merton, the 20th century monk, knew how to create desert space without necessarily being in the desert and he said: 'The contemplative life must provide a place of liberty, of silence, in which possibilities are allowed to surface. New choices, beyond routine choice, are allowed to surface.' So, perhaps here we see the great value of retreating from the frontline of our own life: to see who we are before God our creator and to understand better the choices we can make so that we can be more faithful and more fully human. On Ash Wednesday we are marked with ash in the sign of the cross and reminded that 'you are but dust and to dust you shall return'. However, through the entirety of the season of Lent we have the opportunity to learn the truth of St Augustine's famous phrase that, 'the glory of God is a human being fully alive'. What can we do through Lent to help us know what will enable us to be 'fully alive'. What can help us to learn this is by stepping back, taking time out and allowing space for contemplation in order to hear again the power of the call of Christ to each one of us to, 'take up your cross and follow me'.

We often think of the desert as a place of silence and utter desolation – sand, wind and heat and nothing else. But the desert in the Holy Land isn't so much like that. There are dangers, but there is also beauty. It's not for nothing that the monastic communities thrived in the wilderness between Jerusalem and the Jordan river. The isolation offers an opportunity to re-focus. Interestingly the Hebrew word for desert is 'midbar' and it is linguistically close to the Hebrew word 'medabar' which means speak. It suggests that far from being a place of silence, the desert is a place of speaking, specifically, it is where God speaks which, throughout the Bible, it is what God does. And so for us too, perhaps we can embrace the possibility that our desert or wilderness place might give us the opportunity to hear the word of God for us.

It would be wonderful if it were possible to experience the truth of our full humanity regardless of the context in which we exist. But as humans it is hard and often impossible to detach ourselves from our living conditions. Palestinian Christians enter into the holy season of Lent with a deep sense of fear that their lives as individuals and as a community are becoming more threatened and increasingly damaged as each year passes. Under these conditions in which a cruel regime is creating such devastation and suffering, most of all in Gaza, but increasingly in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, to be 'a human being fully alive' becomes less and less possible. This is the struggle in which we are engaged: to lift the shackles of oppression. It is a spiritual battle but it is a political one too. I believe that as humans we are more fully alive when we make wider connections of shared humanity beyond our immediate circle of concern.

When Jesus was led into the desert to face down the demons of temptation, he did not do it for the sake of his own enlightenment but in order to equip him to fulfil his calling for the sake of humanity. Likewise, our time in Lent ought not to be only a journey of self-discovery but also to attune our ears and eyes further, wider, deeper: to strengthen the bonds of humanity reaffirming the truth revealed to us in Jesus Christ – we are all children of God, united in our common humanity.

Christians here in the UK have a role to play and it is to stand in solidarity with the suffering Palestinians and to exert effort to pursue peace and reconciliation for all people. So, as you journey through Lent towards the liberation and joy of Easter, please remember, those who suffer, not only in Palestine and Israel but in many other places in our fragile and damaged world: those who are literally under fire and in fear of their lives. In the stillness of whatever desert or wilderness place you can discover here, please attune your ear to the cry for justice which is too easily drowned out by the voices of those who have a vested interest in silencing that voice. As Thomas Merton said, 'Contemplation is the spring and action is the stream'. So, let us find that spring in the desert and flow with that stream.

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